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County library hit hardest by budget cuts, Elrich says

Governor's state budget yet to be approved by legislators

by Jeremy Arias | Staff Writer

Former Takoma Park council member and current Montgomery County Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At large) returned to his hometown Monday night to update his former colleagues on the tenuous state of the county executive's newly released proposed budget, which he said hinges too heavily on assumptions.

Facing a \$750 million shortfall, County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) held true to his statement that, in terms of cuts to balance the budget, everything is on the table.

County libraries were hit hardest with a 23 percent cut, while more than 230 county employees could lose their jobs, Elrich told the council in reviewing the budget. The executive also seems to be banking a bit too much on the County Council passing a measure that would raise the county's energy tax to generate an additional \$50 million, Elrich said; and he added that it also depends on a much-debated ambulance fee, which Leggett claims would charge insurance companies every time an ambulance is called, raising an estimated \$14 million. Many council members have voiced particular opposition to the ambulance fee, saying the cost would likely fall on residents and would discourage them from calling 911 in emergency situations.

"He needs the votes to pass both those things, and if we don't pass them, then we've got a \$64 million hole to fill. That's a big assumption," Elrich said. "It's one thing to make assumptions about tax revenues where you might be up or down; ... but it's another thing to assume that the council is going to pass this tax and the ambulance fee."

Elrich also shared his reservations regarding potential changes to the governor's state budget, which itself has yet to be approved by legislators. If altered, the state budget could pass more shortfalls onto the county, he said.

"If there's any reduction for health and human services, that is money that gets ultimately passed down to the county that would be another unknown," he said. "So we're kind of waiting to see what the final take is on the [state's] budget."

In the same way Leggett's budget will depend on Gov. Martin O'Malley's proposal, Takoma Park City Manager Barbara Burns Matthews' budget will depend on the county's shortfalls. Matthews will present her budget for the council's scrutiny April 5.

Following Elrich's presentation, the council approved a first vote on an ordinance passing revisions to the city's housing law. The change allows landlords and tenants to agree, via written consent, to allow a landlord access to a unit before the 48 hours usually required

under city law. A second vote will be taken on the ordinance at a future date before it is officially made law.

Items passed on the consent agenda with a single vote included measures extending the terms of both the city-appointed Task Force on Environmental Action and the Hospital Land Use Committee.

Finally, the council met with three representatives from an informal resident's group that has been meeting to discuss problems faced by the Takoma Junction section of the city. The junction, located at the busy intersection of Carroll, Ethan Allen and Philadelphia avenues, has been plagued with traffic problems that in turn limit growth opportunities for nearby businesses.

Despite the council's eagerness to have the group formed into an official city-appointed task force, Councilwoman Colleen Clay (Ward 2) cautioned the group that, with the weighty topics they intend to resolve, a substantial amount of the city staff's time and resources would be required.

"I can't imagine developing a group that works on Takoma Junction issues that doesn't have copious amounts of staff reports to support it," she said. "We're talking about economic development, land use, coordinating with the state and the county ... [to resolve] the worst traffic glitch that I know of."

The council was in favor of forming the group, but the task force will likely not be formally approved soon. Next Monday the council will meet at 7:30 p.m. in the Azalea room for an informal discussion with residents regarding whether or not the city should consider amending its laws restricting off-sale beer and wine stores, while the April 5 meeting will be dominated by the city manager's budget presentation.